

Stolen Bases Weren't Enough for Angels

By Martin Felsenfeld

Nobody said that it was going to be easy for the California Angels in 1975. After all, the Angels were coming off their first last-place finish in club history, so when spring training began, the first thing Manager Dick Williams told his club, "I guarantee you that as long as I am the manager, you will never again finish last."

But Williams could not keep the promise at season's end. The Angels did improve, but only on their record, which was 72-89, or 25½ games off the pace of the Oakland A's, a team Williams walked out on two years earlier.

There are several reasons to blame for their second straight last-place finish, and one of them has to do with home runs.

Actually, the inability to hit home runs was more appropriate. The '75 Angels hit only 55 homers, by far the fewest in the majors, and easily the lowest total in club history.

Ironically enough, two of those were grand-slams--both hit by outfielder Leroy Stanton, who led the club with 14. No other Angel player had more than six. The grand-slamers were the first hit by any Angels player since 1971, when Roger Repoz last did it against the World Series-bound Baltimore Orioles.

A second possible reason the team finished last was the shortstop, where the Angels needed four players to play that position. But it didn't help. Dave Chalk, Billy Smith, Orlando Ramirez, and Mike Miley made a whopping 50 errors--which led to 184 fielding mistakes and 95 earned runs.

Then there is pitching, although not all of it was bad. Andy Hassler, a promising great pitcher, was anything but that as he set a club record by losing 11 straight and finished 3-12, with an ERA of 5.94.

Bill Singer returned from June, 1974 back surgery only to become ineffective. He finished 1975 with 7 wins, the same win total as in 1974, but he also lost 15 games. Singer's ERA was 4.98 and in December was traded to the Texas Rangers.

And the bullpen, as it has been since 1972, was again a major problem. The Angels managed only 16 saves, with 12 of them coming from Don Kirkwood (7) and Jim Brewer (5), who was obtained from the Los Angeles Dodgers in July.

There was little hitting to compensate for the errors made by the four shortstops, and on the last day of the season, September 28th, they didn't get any. A no-hitter pitched by Vida Blue, Glenn Abbott, Paul Lindblad and Rollie Fingers of Oakland against the Angels, 5-0, was the first time ever that four pitchers together threw a no-hitter.

Yet the Angels did have some highlights worth talking about. They set a club record with 220 stolen bases, the first major league team to have 200 or more steals since the Pittsburgh Pirates last did it in 1919. Outfielder Mickey Rivers led the club with 70 steals, and second baseman Jerry Remy had 34.

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Nolan Ryan, for the third consecutive year, pitched a no-hitter, and it came on June 1 when he blanked the Orioles, 1-0. The no-hitter in this game was Ryan's fourth in three seasons, tying Sandy Koufax, the former Dodger who also pitched four of them in the 1960's.

But Ryan was also on the disabled list during the year with an arm injury, and finished 14-12, down from 22-16 in 1974, and had only 186 strikeouts. As a result, he did not lead the league in strikeouts for the first time in four seasons, as was the case with striking out 300 or more batters.

Second-year pitcher Frank Tanana improved on his '74 season by posting a 16-9 mark, and led the majors in strikeouts with 269. In one game, he struck out 17 Texas batters to set a league record for most strikeouts in a game by a left-handed pitcher.

Ed Figueroa, nicknamed "Senor Stopper" because most of his wins came after Angel losses, finished at 16-13. The Puerto Rican-born Figueroa also struck out 139 batters.

For a team whose batting average was just .246, Chalk battered .27 and was third on the club in hits (140), and second in RBI's (56). Stanton, in addition to his 14 homers, hit .261 and led the team in RBI's with 82.

Youngsters Bruce Bochte and Dave Collins also had moderate success at the plate. Bochte hit a team-high .285, but because he did not have the minimum 502 plate appearances, he was not declared the Angels' batting champion for 1975. Collins, whose hometown of Rapid City, S. D., was named after his family, batted .266 in his rookie season.

Remy, also in his first year in the majors, batted .258 and had a runner-up team total of 147 hits, plus his 34 steals. Rivers hit .284 with 175 hits, both of them tops on the Angels, as well as stolen bases.

The Angels' longest winning streak of the year was a mere four games, which was accomplished twice, on May 16-19, and on June 4-7. Fortunately, the team that had a club-record 11-game losing streak in 1974, never lost more than seven in a row in '75.

Even though it was for last place, the Angels' home attendance improved in 1975, where they drew 1,058,163, an increase of 140,894 over 1974.

At the December winter meetings in Hollywood, Fla., the Angels traded Rivers and Figueroa to the New York Yankees for outfielder Bobby Bonds. California later made a second trade, this one with the Chicago White Sox, whom they sent outfielder Morris Nettles (who batted just .231 in '75) to. In return they got Bill Melton, who led the A. L. in homers in 1971 with 33.

With the Bicentennial year of 1976 coming up, only time will tell if the Angels can perhaps celebrate America's 200th birthday with a World Series appearance. Dick Williams ought to know this; he's already been there three times.